

HABS MD- 42

"Bon Air"
Mr. Falston, Harford County

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
John H. Scarff - District Officer,
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'BON AIR'

By J. ALEXIS SHRIVER

Who wants to join me in the fascinating (even though it be futile) building up of a playing card house, about an old tradition concerning a pirate? Every indication points to the contrary, and yet there must be some reason to explain the constant search for hidden treasure which has continued for a hundred years.

Let us take our playing cards and build our fragile house of romance at "Bon Air", the gem of a French mansion built in 1794 by Claudius Francis Frederick de La Porte near the Gunpowder Falls in Harford County, almost adjoining the old Quaker Meeting House at Fallston.

Well, who was he, and what is this all about? you restlessly ask. I don't exactly know, but I have traced a number of threads which may allow us to know him a little better, and help us guess whether he was a pirate or a much maligned Gentleman.

Thomas Balch in his "The French in America 1777-83", gives the lists of Regiments and officers who came across the Atlantic with Rochambeau to help us win our Independence. These troops marched through Harford County on their way to the Battle of Yorktown, and camped at "Bush Town", the then County seat, on September 10th, 1781. After the surrender of Cornwallis, these same troops returned through Harford in August, 1782.

The original map which Rochambeau used on these marches is in the Library of Congress. The names of the places are in French, and he starts from "Havre de Boston" (the harbor of Boston), and as he crosses the Susquehanna we find "Havre de Grace" (the harbor of favor).

We know that Lafayette and his troops crossed the Susquehanna at Bald Friar, and marched through Harford in advance of Rochambeau's troops, and there is a story that two of his officers, Major De Gimat and Captain Grem (or Graeme) were so entranced with the beauties of the Deer Creek Valley that they then and there decided that when the war was over, if they survived, they would return and live among the hills of Harford. This was actually carried out, for in 1793 Angus Grem returns, buys a tract of land from Benjamin Rumsey and builds himself a home which he calls "Maiden's Bower", and this it is understood was with money furnished by De Gimat

Among the officers of the "Veinnois" Regiment of the French army we find that the Colonel "En Second" was the Count de La Porte. The Major of this Regiment was De Gimat. In the Regiment "Touraine" among the eighteen sub-Lieutenants was a de La Porte, without a doubt a relation of the Count, who like Gimat, Graeme and others fell under the spell of the lovely valleys and sylvan dells of Harford County, as they passed through en route to victory at Yorktown.

The Regiment "Touraine", after the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, returned to the West Indies with "Saint Simon" on the ships of "Count de Grasse" on November 4, 1781, and arrived at the Isle of San Domingo November 26th. In 1783 this Regiment returned to France. It is certainly possible, nay more than probable, that de La Porte stayed behind in San Domingo. It was a French Colony, and his later shipping interests would indicate that he knew the West Indies well.

So let us settle Claudius Francis Frederick de La Porte in San Domingo, and with him after the French Revolution in 1789 his brother Pierre Francis de La Porte. These cards which build our house are mere deuces and tres, but with our deleted pack, will stand as well as Kings or Queens.

In 1793 Claudius Francis Frederick and his wife Betsy Herbert appear in Harford County, and purchased from Moses Dillon (and let us watch this name later) a tract of land at the head of the lovely "Laurel Brook" in Harford County, a part of "Bond's Forest", which they rename "Bon Air". Now just what does this mean? The explanation is simple. He and Betsy, with probably his brother as Captain of his "brig or snow Jennie" have made their escape from the terrible Black uprising in the island of San Domingo, and have arrived in Baltimore with whatever they had saved of their fortune. It may have been that, scenting the coming disaster of 1793 in San Domingo he "cashed in" his holdings there and sailed Northward before the storm broke. He must have had cash for he pays £600 pounds current money for the 176½ acres of "Bond's Forest" plus 16 acres called "Clark's Abode", and then immediately begins the construction of his charming French house in the pediment of the South front of which he places a carved stone marked "F. D. L. P. 1794."

And so had come the realization of his dream in June of 1781, as came also the realization to Graeme in October 1793, for each returned to live

and die among the peaceful valleys of Harford County.

Nor were they the only French settlers in Harford, for by the records we find in 1794, 1795 and 1796 a number of transfers of land to French, as witness: Robert Cain deeds the farm next to de La Porte to Francis Rini Perye Ferry; Aquilla Hall deeds 212 acres on the North side of Deer Creek to George Larue (probably near Maiden's Bower, owned by our friend Graeme); Nicholas Day McComas deeds "Horse Range" to Charles Asselin De Sables, and Stephen Raphael mortgages his slaves to Hugh McCurdy. Strange it is that but few of these French family names now exist in a county which holds dear such names as Havre de Grace, Bel Air and Bon Air.

But let us return to "Bon Air" and the de La Portes. Amid the old trees which have sheltered it for well over 100 years, the old stone house with its scarred stucco covering suggests a peaceful bit of Normandy. Its wing looks as if old de La Porte had planned to form a typical French courtyard, if only he had connected the substantial farm buildings to the house on the other side to carry out the characteristic North of France flavor. But most of all the roof holds our attention. Its steep pitch, its hipped ends, through which the tall chimneys extend, to be later braced to the comb with rods of iron, its curving slope at the eaves are features even more unusual than the two glaringly different dormer windows, irregularly placed, just above the curve at the base of its steep pitch. French country houses are always severely plain, the outstanding feature is invariably the roof. So let us ascend to the attic to examine the solid timbers and interweaving ties and braces, the sight of which fully justifies old Captain de La Porte's remark, "if this roof were inverted, it would float." Maybe he felt that after his San Domingo experience he would be safer if he had a potential ship at hand. Another delightful tradition of the old Captain which survives is, that unhappy in a bed, he placed hooks in the ceiling of one of his spacious bedrooms, from which he suspended a hammock, to revive the memory of happy days a ship-board, and if the pirate legend is true, he should have had a cutlass and a pirate's flag within easy reach. To this day the hooks are pointed out to prove the story.

But what of this pirate legend? For years diggers for gold have searched the broad acres of "Bon Air" with pick and shovel, to discover the hidden treas-

ure. Within the present year two large excavations have been made at night by unknown seekers for the pirate's horde, one eight feet deep at one extremity of the farm, and the other under a huge cornerstone which was buried at least five feet in the ground, and so for some reason the story that a pirate's treasure has been buried on old "Bon Air" is as alive to-day as it has been during the past hundred years.

"On March 23, 1795, Frederick Delaporte, merchant in Baltimore, chartered his brig or snow 'Jennie', Hugh Lyle master, to Messrs. Buchanan & Young, Massey and James, to carry a cargo of provisions to the West Indies and bring a return freight, on the condition of paying to him, said Frederick, a sum of \$500 Maryland currency, if the voyage was performed in ninety days, and \$1000 if she was detained any longer. The 'Jennie' cleared at Baltimore on or about the 10th of April 1795, and proceeded on her voyage and expected to have been in Jamaica the next month, when on the 8th of May about 7 o'clock in the evening she was captured by the French National vessel the 'Scorpion' Captain Julian Olivien, who sent the 'Jennie' to the port of Gonaiers in the "bite of Leog" in the Island of San Domingo, and carried away the master Hugh Lyle to Petite Goave, another port of the same Island."

The value of the brig or snow "Jennie", copper bolted and copper bottomed, was \$	11,133.84
Freight \$950 Maryland currency	286.06
Expenses and costs of Captain Hugh Lyle, as per his bill	425.00

A total value of \$14,225.00 which loss was demanded as one of the French Spoilation claims.

Was the "Jennie", before she was chartered to Buchanan & Young, a pirate ship? Had he other vessels? Would that we could find the threads to complete the frail fabric of our pirate tradition!

But Frederick was not to live many years at "Bon Air", for in 1797, only three years after he had capped his new house with an inverted "snow or brig", he was laid away in the arched stone tomb which he had built in his garden, leaving behind his wife Betsy and a Will, which is recorded among the Records of Harford County, by which his wife "Betsy Herbert" was to have all of his property, and at her death it was to descend to his brother Francis Delaporte, he to account for two-thirds of the estate to his sisters Elizabeth and Johanna. He quantums

his slaves, subject to Betsy's approval, and Betsy acts as Executrix to his Will, but the pigeon hole which should contain the papers in the Orphans' Court is empty, and so begins the mystery as to what he left. Where have the papers gone? Why is there no inventory of his personal property? What did Betsy inherit? Here is the important missing ace in our house of cards.

Betsy must have lived in comfort. She had a number of slaves, and she even loaned Joseph Wheeler money on mortgage, for which a negro man "Ralph" is given her as security, but she does not survive Claudius Francis Frederick long, for in six years (1803) she finds herself beside him in the old arched tomb, and her Will leaves everything to her brother-in-law Francis, except the freedom of her slaves. She seemed particularly fond of Peter, and provided that "the sum of \$100. be set aside to set him up in a trade", and \$20.00 pocket money should be given him from time to time during his apprenticeship. A touch of her affection for Peter is added when she leaves him her shoe buckles.

And now comes Francis on the scene. He has dropped the Pierre Francois and become plain Francis, as did his brother who forgot the Caludius Francis and was "commonly called Frederick", so his Will declares.

Where has Francis been all these years? At "Bon Air", in San Domingo, or on shipboard? Is he the pirate, or was Frederick? More cards missing for our unsubstantial house.

But now he is in possession of "Bon Air", and as a resident of Harford vouches for Frenchmen who wish to be naturalized as citizens of Harford County. In 1805 he stands as voucher for Mathews Pascal and also for Joseph Despaux. Are these fellow pirates? Part of the crew, or merely peaceful fellow Frenchmen? All trace of them has gone, and we shall never know. The old Baltimore directories list a "Thomas Pascal" as "a mariner".

About this time appears Nicholas Bonnefin, who sells to Benjamin Desobry a one-half interest in the land adjoining "Bon Air". Francis Marcilly owns the other half. There was a Bonnefin, listed as a sub-Lieutenant in the Regiment Soissonnais of Rochambeau's army; Marcilly was listed as a 1st Lieutenant in the Regiment of Metz of the same army.

Another thread which weaves into this fabric is the name of Desobry, for we turn the old Records of Harford County a power of attorney from "Stephen Jumel and Benjamin Desobry of the State of New York, merchants

and co-partners trading under the firm name of Jumel & Desobry." Now this Stephen Jumel was none other than the husband of the noted Madame Jumel whose love affair with Alexander Hamilton after her husband's death has been frequently suggested, and who finally married Aaron Burr. His proposal to her is a classic: "Madame, I offer you my hand; my heart you have long possessed."

Now Francis begins to display his inherited money, for he enlarges "Bon Air" by purchasing in 1804 Desobry's interest in the adjoining farm for \$800.00, and Marcilly's interest for \$750.00.

There seems to be little else that we can unearth, dig as we may among the records. Only one thing we find. In the Baltimore City directory of 1824, "Dellaport Francis, gent. 91 Harford St. o. t." The o. t. stands for Old Town as distinguished from F. P. (Fells Point) or r. a. (Ridgeley's Addition). The directory says Gent (Gentleman) not Pirate.

Could his city life have been too much for him, or did he fall a victim to someone who wanted the bachelor "gentlemen's" treasure? for he dies that very year, 1824.

So, having run our threads leading to the various neighbors and associates of Francis without proving anything, we lay him in the old tomb on June 25, 1824, beside his brother and his wife, and seal up the tomb with the old stone marked:

I. H. S.

Sacred

to the memory of

Fred'k and Elizth DELAPORTE

and to

Francis Delaporte

died June 25, 1824.

They should have placed on this tomb R. I. P. (rest in peace), for apparently they have not done so.

1824 is a long way back, and the vault is still strong, but sometime during the intervening period it has evidently been searched, and has every corner of the farm, for the supposed buried treasure. The gaping entrance to the tomb invites the curious to peer in, and there lie what remains of Frederick, Elizabeth and Francis, their bones intermingled in gruesome disarray.

The temptation to verify this uncanny picture induced me to persuade Mr. Pickering, my obliging photographer from Annapolis, to take a flashlight of the tomb. I am not sure which one of the three de La Portes objected, but as the flash was set off by the automatic spark, I heard a shriek and saw Pickering throw down his flash holder and writhe in pain. A draft of air out

of the vault had inflicted such serious burns on the hand of the prying photographer that recourse to the nearest physician was necessary, and two weeks of daily dressings of the scorched fingers was the cost of the picture.

And now comes Pierre Louis Auguste Marchand, and takes out administration papers on the estate of Francis and of his brother Frederick Delaporte, in 1827. Who is Marchand? And why has the inventory of the estate of Frederick disappeared from among the Records, if Betsy or Francis made one of personalty? In the second administration Marchand reports a ground rent on No. 42 N. Gay St., in Baltimore valued at \$4,000 and another on a house in Queen Street Fell's Point at \$1,000, but any other estate—pirate treasure or what not—does not seem to be accounted for, and Louis Marchand takes possession without recording in Harford County any other personal property than the ground rents in Baltimore. Now, did he find anything else between 1824 when Francis died and 1827 when he reported the ground rents? Probably not, for he entered into a suit with a neighbor Robinson, charging that Robinson had moved the line fence into the land left him by Delaporte on the day succeeding the latter's death. Could this be connected with the five foot cornerstone which has lately been undermined? Was he and were neighbors already searching for the buried treasure?

But how are we to discover the connection between our friends the supposed piratical Delaportes and Pierre Louise Auguste Marchand?

The missing trump card is found as we take from their proper pigeon hole the French Spoliation claim papers, where we learn that in 1886 Walter W. Preston, the former Judge of Harford County, acts as Administrator of the estate of Frederick Delaporte. Before the government would pass the claim for the loss of the "brig or snow Jennie", it was necessary to prove the relationship of the claimant's to old Claudius Francis Frederick, and here we unfold the mystery of Louis (with the other names now conveniently dropped) Marchand.

Louis Pierre Auguste Marchand was born in Nancy, France, and was the son of Elizabeth Delaporte, one of the sisters mentioned in the Will of old Claudius Francis Frederick Delaporte. He was exiled at the time of the French Revolution, he being then the Attorney-General of the Department of Lorraine, and having a diploma from the "Universite de France" and a license authorizing him to practice medicine

in the kingdom of France at the time of Louis Philippe. Escaping to Savannah, Georgia, he met and married Louise Coquillion, a refugee from the Island of San Domingo. They came to "Bon Air" in 1824, when he inherits the fortune from his uncle. He returns to France for a short time. The lure of the hidden treasure may have brought him back to dig and delve over "Bon Air" until successful or disgusted, in 1831, he sells to Francis Gallega and moves to Alabama, near Mobile, thence to Little Rock, Arkansas, and finally dies in Louisiana in 1858 or '59. And so ends so far as Harford County is concerned the residence of the Delaportes.

The money secured from the French Spoliation claims in 1886 brings forth some correspondence from Madame Marie Delaporte, the widow of Xavier Ernest Delaporte, who claimed, so she states, to have been the grandson of Pierre Francois Delaporte, who died under the name of Claudius Frederick Delaporte. These letters in French written from le Havre, France, to Judge Preston are interesting as showing the French connection still existing at that time.

When Marchand sells the property to Francis Gallega he excepts however "the part enclosed which has heretofore been used as a burying ground, and which is not included in this grant and said Louis Marchand be permitted at any time hereafter to close up the entrance to said graveyard."

Would that he could return and close once more the entrance to the graves!

And so we come to the Gallegas. And here let me wander along another thread for possible connection with Rochambeau's French army, and possibly with Moses Dillon, from whom Claudius Francis originally purchased "Bon Air" in 1793.

There is a curious interweaving of Irish names throughout French history, and in our Revolutionary history we find the "Regiment Dillon" with Rochambeau at Yorktown. The story of the Regiment Dillon goes back to James II, who when he sought refuge in France with Louis XIV, took with him Count Arthur Dillon and a regiment of Irishmen who supported his cause. This regiment and the Irishmen composing it became Frenchmen, and continued under the name of the Regiment Dillon. We find among the officers of the 633 soldiers of this regiment who came over with Rochambeau such names as the following:

Colonel
Count Dillon
en Second
Taffe
Lieut-Colonel
De Mahoney
Major
Browne
Paymaster
Harvey.

Among the Captains and Lieutenants such names as: Moore, Shée, O'Neil (with ranking of Major), O'Berin or O'Brien, MacEntire, O'Reilly, D'Arcy, McDermott, Fitzgerald and Hays, together with a host of others.

Is it not possible that Gallega is the French modification of our only too well known Irish name Gallagher, and could the Dillons, Delaportes and Gallegas have been "Veterans of Foreign Wars?"

From the Gallegas the property passes to Caleb Harlan, from Harlan to Benjamin Ferris of Wilmington, Delaware, and in 1854, to James T. Watson, the grandfather of the present owner, James O. Watson, the third generation of good Quaker stock, who assures me that the gaping mouth of the tomb and the gruesome skeletons have been in full view all of his life and during that of his father. He has shown me the recent diggings of midnight marauders in search of the treasure, as well as the numerous excavations which he tells me have gone on intermittently during all of his life and that of his father and grandfather.

It is useless to try to weave anything more than a filmy romance out of the threads which we can find and our tottering house of cards can easily be upset, but looking at the beauty of the old French house, I prefer to turn to the ancient Baltimore Directory, under which Francis Delaporte is listed as "gentleman."

ADDENDUM TO:
BON AIR
(Francis Delaporte House)
Laurel Brook Road
Fallston vicinity
Harford County
Maryland

HABS MD-42
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
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